

## Working Class Heroes

### Abstract

*This research is the first stage in a longitudinal study of mature women learners from three feeder colleges to the University of Wolverhampton in three 'disciplines', nursing, teaching and psychology. The research questions I will address eventually are: to what extent have the aspirations of the women learners been met? What is the context in which these aspirations have been lived out? How can this inform institutional policy and strategy in the context of widening participation? Preliminary findings indicate that these women choose to take degree courses in vocational subjects because they see job opportunities in these fields, they are carers and therefore have personal experience and/or they have missed out on further and higher education earlier in their lives. The institution has developed various initiatives to raise the aspirations of these potential students particularly in the local area. **This paper explores whether and how these students' aspirations have informed these initiatives.***

### Introduction

If the Government is to achieve its target of increased participation in HE as set out in its white paper "The Future of Higher Education" (DoES 2003) then there will have to be an increase in the number of people entering HE as 1<sup>st</sup> generation learners, learners who would not have traditionally seen higher education as an option for themselves. Presently there seems to be a big push towards the 14-19 year old sector and to even younger ages groups with initiatives such as *AimHigher* but these initiatives, on face value, seem to ignore other groups of potential entrants such as mature women and working class men. On a personal level as a mature woman who came from a working class background where entry to higher education was an aspiration that was not fulfilled for my mother but was for me. I wanted to explore the lived experience of mature women as I felt that I could relate to their situations. This paper will explore whether or not and to what extent the aspirations of mature women (those over 21 years of age at initial entry to higher education) have influenced policy, practice and initiatives to encourage widening participation at the University of Wolverhampton.

### Research questions

In this primary research I have tried to address three basic questions 1. What are the aspirations of my selected group? 2. What triggered these aspirations? 3. Have these aspirations influenced policy, practice and initiatives?

### Theoretical concepts and models

Reay et al (2002) identifies that mature learners play a pivotal role in the expansion of higher education but that complexities of these students' lives make things difficult for mature women to succeed. She concludes that "...the rhetoric on widening participation needs to move beyond rhetoric into policies which provide possibilities for realisation". The concept of "outsiders within" and difference, (Williams, 2001) may be in fact the opposite in the post 1992 institutions and statistical data from the University of Wolverhampton (65% of entrants over 21 years, 58% of entrants women) shows that the normal profile of a student being 18 years of age with 'A' levels is a myth. The notion of non-traditional entrants has now become 'traditional' in this regional, post 1992 institution. Stuart (2002) points out that achieving widening participation will not create a 'magic wand' that will cure the ills of society but that it should provide greater opportunity for all, not just specific learner groups.

In looking for conceptual models to inform my research on mature women's aspirations Hodkinson (1996) offers a theoretical model based on pragmatic rational decision-making i.e. decisions based on economic, social and cultural experience and aspirations set within a personal schemata. Although his research group is young people, the issues raised by Hodkinson have value in an environment that is increasingly employability and independent learner driven. However, Davies (2001) suggests that the decision making process for mature learners is more complex and multi-dimensional than this and my own small scale study bears this out. Davies (2001) raises the notion of fragility, in that though aspirations to enter higher education have been raised there is a feeling that this might not actually happen for reasons such as finance, life events and "*the relative newness of the learner identity*". This is an area that at the present time this research can only hint at (by student comments) rather than deal with it in any detail. There is a difference between what Usher (2003) identifies as autonomy that includes the ability to exercise choice in relation to need, and the lived experiences of mature women who often do not have the luxury of choice without considering the needs or impact of any choice made on others. The concept of learner identity as articulated by Green and Webb (1997) and further developed by Webb (2001) is fundamental to this study as the need to get an identity outside of the family or the need to create a new identity that would be meaningful and in some cases life changing was clearly seen by students to be not just desirable but an essential outcome of their aspirations.

Parr (2001) develops the notion that for mature women learners aspiring to enter higher education is about more than gaining a paper qualification it is a period of transition and change.

In this paper the research can only identify the early articulation of the desire for change through using a model of identity and difference however the notion of difference maybe challenged in this Institution. Reay et al (2001) defines institutional habitus as specific effects on an individual by attending a particular HEI. Thomas (2002) relates a concept of institutional habitus to student retention that may promote success for students from non-traditional backgrounds. Could it be that on face value, that mature women learners are not outsiders within our institution? In this paper I do not investigate the learning environments and institutional habitus that the students will encounter. Here I focus on the self expressed learner identities and aspirations of the mature women in the study and I conjecture how and if those identities have influenced university policy, practice and initiatives.

This paper is very much work in progress and is at present based on qualitative data from a range of sources. The research in its entirety is conceived as a longitudinal empirical study of the lived experiences of mature (over 21 years) women students in sample feeder colleges and the University of Wolverhampton. The student experiences will be monitored and analysed using the Student Life Cycle model to plot significant stages to address the overarching research questions: to what extent have the aspirations of the student group been met? What is the context in which these aspirations have been lived out? What theoretical model(s) can explain the relationship between aspirations and experience? . In order to address these questions first we have to find out what are the aspirations of mature working class women learners and what triggers these aspirations. This paper seeks to address this initial question and moves on to explore how (or if) these aspirations have influenced university policy, practice and initiatives

## **Method**

Interviews with 26 students studying on Access courses in three local colleges with strong historical and cultural links to the University of Wolverhampton were conducted in focus groups and individual interviews. In two colleges the focus groups were in groups of ten and then were broken down into two smaller groups of five. Each college had a slightly different approach to the way they wanted to introduce me to their students. In one college I was asked to take part in an early evening class that was focusing on preparing for interviews for entry to higher education. The students in that group came from General Access and Access to Nursing programmes. In another college I was asked to join a writing skills session where the students were writing their personal statements for their UCAS applications. Again this group consisted of both General and Access to Nursing students.

In both of these two colleges I was introduced to students and then was given time to tell them about my research and then to ask them if they wanted to participate in the research. On both occasions students immediately came back and wanted to talk. So as to not lose the interest I conducted focus groups with those students there and then. Interestingly all the students who came back to see me from both colleges were from the Access to Nursing programmes.

The encounters were not taped but extensive notes were taken. In both of these sessions the students first wanted to know my credentials and background and that triggered them to tell me their stories. As outlined in feminist research studies such as Edwards (1998) the group of students with whom I would be interacting would be influenced by me, as I would have some affect on them simply by asking and raising issues that may have not consciously been thought of or discussed. Feeling that I had some credibility as either a mature woman and specifically as a mature woman working within the system that they aspired to join was articulated by some of those who volunteered as a reason to take part in the research. Some felt that I might be useful in helping them achieve their goals. On both occasions I wanted to know; what their aspirations were? and secondly, what triggered these aspirations?. Each of the larger focus groups lasted for 15 minutes and each of the smaller groups of four students lasted for 10 minutes. In the college where the students were writing their UCAS personal statements six of the students allowed me to read their statements, though they did not want me to make copies of them as they were working documents however, they did allow me to make notes. Later two of the students e-mailed their final statements to me.

In the third college I was asked to speak to students after personal tutorials, six students came back to speak to me. These interviews lasted between five to ten minutes again at these initial interviews the students questioned me on my background and research and then I asked them what their aspirations were and what triggered them.

All the students lived locally to their further education colleges, 22 out of the 26 students were white, 2 were from a Pakistani background and two described themselves as Black. All identified themselves as working class very often identifying themselves with local residential areas, "I'm from.....estate" or "I live on the ....."

In addition to these interviews with mature women studying in further education, I conducted a further six interviews with mature women currently studying at the University of Wolverhampton.

To answer my third question, (how (if at all) have mature women's aspirations influenced university policy, practice and initiatives?) I conducted face-to-face and telephone interviews with staff across the institution including the Higher Education Shop and the Student Gateway, The Schools and College Liaison Unit, and the School of Health

At this stage of the research the analysis of the data will be and has been by using and combining existing identified theoretical models e.g. Hodkinson or Webb as a framework for articulating what is happening.

## **Findings**

### **Aspirations and Triggers**

From the data collected from the interviews with students asking the two following questions, What are these women's aspirations? What triggered them? the following categories or subheadings emerged life event, 'something for me', career prospects, these maybe seen as over generalisations but at this stage enable some discussion within existing theoretical frameworks.

### **Life event**

From those initial interviews there are distinct issues emerging that relate to the motivation and aspirations to go into nursing. The most dominant issue has been some life event that has motivated the potential learner, this has included:

- Caring for a relative
- Having a child
- Going into hospital themselves
- Substantial visits to a relative in hospital
- Experiencing and interacting with health care workers
- An emergency 'event' that made them respect the people in the roles they witnessed

#### **Student C**

"I've looked after my Dad for three years and over that time I got to talking to a couple of community nurses, they weren't too different from me, its just that they didn't start a family as early as I did"

#### **Student E**

"At school I did some community service in a hospital visiting patients at the time I quite enjoyed it but didn't think as working in a hospital as a nurse as I didn't get the grades I expected. When my kids went to school I thought I would do something for me and I saw the Access to Nursing advertised in the local paper and so I thought that could be for me.....I suppose I had been thinking of doing something for a long time ...I do remember some of the telly ads where they list all the people who help when someone has an accident and thinking that there had to be something I could do"

#### **Student I**

"I would like to have a job that will give me skills that I can use anywhere...I'd like to be a nurse and possibly work for a while in a different country, why? Well I suppose you see images of nurses on telly and they look so in charge and well useful...I want to be like that. I remember falling at school and having stitches the nurses there were so in charge I know that impressed me "

#### **Student A**

"I've always wanted to be a nurse, I just didn't think I had it in me until I visited my auntie she was being nursed by a girl who was in the same year as me. She went to college, I got a job...I suppose seeing her gave me a kick up the pants"

Student F

"It feels a bit corny to say I want to be a nurse....its like Miss World...I want to travel the world, work with children and be a nurse....but I do, why? Well I suppose I have an idea of what nursing is about ...you know, I've been to hospital, I've seen things on the telly and I want to be like that"

### ***Something for me***

In addition to the 'life event' and in some cases the more dominant issue has been the desire to study, for many this has been articulated as "wanting to something for me", or "proving to myself that I can do this". It is about something deeply personal to them and not about fulfilling other peoples' expectations however in all the interviews the mature women mentioned other people in some way or another.

Student G

"It's my time now, I've loved having my family but its gets to the point where your known as Stacey's mum, even by the teachers, I don't have name. I want be someone in my own right"

Student I

"My mum is very supportive and she wants me to do something while I can, I think that this is right for me now"

For many the idea of possibly studying for one or two years on an Access course and then three more years at university was not seen as a particular issue. In fact many of the students were taking a very pragmatic approach that meant that they were taking each step at a time. For some just getting on the Access course that could eventually lead to their chosen career met their current aspirations.

Student B

"Starting the Access course has been the biggest step but I was so proud of myself I never thought I would go back to study but I want people I was at school with to see me in a few years time and be impressed....I think they'll be shocked"

Student K

"I didn't really think of studying at a University, to be a nurse, I'm not really thinking of that now...one step at a time...but it gives me a really buzz to think that I could be going in the future. I didn't think Uni was for the likes of me or taught courses like nursing. I thought it was for the clever kids doing English or History"

### ***Career prospects***

Studying nursing in some cases is seen as having the added advantage of being able get a job at the end of it. Employment is a factor that is perceived as a definite advantage but is not the main reason for starting the course.

Student G

".....Oh say! You could say having a baby was life changing...my life's never been the same since. The midwife was amazing she was totally in control and told the young male Doctors a thing or two. .... I'm not sure whether I want to be a nurse or midwife but I want to learn something that will be useful and I want a job"

Student F

"I really wanted to do English but I just couldn't see where that would take me. I can't afford to run up big debts and not have a job at the end of it ....anyway I like course now and find it really interesting"

Student D

"I want to get out of here.....I don't mean the town I've got too many friends here, but I don't see myself living on the ...estate all my life, so its up to me to make things better....I want to study but I also want something with prospects.....OK yes and a decent wage as well"

Though this research is very much work in progress and at the very early stages indications are that a life event, wanting to study for personal fulfilment and then employment is the order of motivational factors as articulated at this time in this particular subject area. In all the interviews directly or indirectly the mature women expressed some desire to make changes. Whether those changes were minor or

major, their aspirations were related to some improvement either to themselves or their situations and in most cases both.

### **Institutional initiatives, policy and practice**

At this point in the research the question to be addressed is how (if at all) have mature women's aspirations influenced university policy, practice and initiatives? In the interviews with specific departments such as, the Schools and College Liaison Unit, and the Higher Education shop, it became clear that there were no specific initiatives aimed at mature women at this point in time. However other initiatives aimed at younger people or specific underrepresented local geographical areas had serendipitously had an impact on mature women. This also does not say that there have not been initiatives in the past or could be in the future.

From my interviews with staff in a range of departments that are aimed at raising aspirations and enabling potential learners to enter higher education such as, The Schools and College Liaison Unit, and the Higher Education shop, I discovered that there are no initiatives to raise aspirations of mature women (at least in this subject and at the present time in general). In fact, one member of staff from the School of Health said:

Staff A

"these women don't need us to raise their aspirations because other things in their lives trigger these aspirations. We need to respond to people and raise awareness of what could be by offering a way of meeting their aspirations"

Meeting those aspirations and raising awareness of how they can be achieved is another matter. At the moment general initiatives for raising awareness of the courses and programmes on offer at the University e.g. Open days, Glimpse programme etc. are in the main about raising the aspirations of the younger age group. However the possibility of fulfilling aspirations through study at the University is raised for some mature women (e.g. mothers of potential students) who accompany their offspring. In other words these initiatives may raise or show a way of meeting some mature women's aspirations by chance rather than by design.

Student H

"I came to an open day with my friend who wanted information for her daughter...while she was talking to someone I had a chat with a woman tutor. We got talking and I said I didn't have any qualifications so she told me I could go to an access course and then possibly come to Uni...so here I am now...its taken me three years up till now but I'm just finishing me first year"

None of the aspiration triggers mentioned in the interviews have directly informed the design of initiatives, policy or practice to increase numbers of this target group. However, understanding the need to react to and help meet those aspirations is having an impact, for example, on the development of foundation degrees. The University has literally opened its doors with initiatives such as the Higher Education Shop creating a less daunting face of the University. Students interviewed by the HE shop commented that:

"A superb idea. Provides a much less daunting experience for people like myself returning to education as a mature student. I received all the information I required in one place and in a friendly and helpful environment."

"I only popped in on the spur of the moment, and I was inspired to realise my dream of doing a degree. I have nearly finished my first year and have achieved really good marks. That first step of entering the HE shop was the most important"

It would seem from these findings and from the statistics supplied by Registry, that the School of Nursing recruits sufficient numbers of mature women not to need any special aspiration raising initiatives. Around 70% (380) of all students enrolled on the Registered Nursing Programmes for 2003/4 were mature women. Nevertheless, their staff and existing students visit colleges and community groups to inspire the mainly mature women. Other subjects in which mature women are underrepresented have adopt similar initiatives, such the Women into Computing initiative. However, most of the initiatives are centrally run with no specific subject or school focus. These include visits and talks given to Access course students who are generally mature women.

The University has recognised that where ever possible any aspiration raising activities should be open to all. Present initiatives for widening participation are concentrating on underrepresented

geographical locations, raising awareness in specific communities. Early indicators show however, that it is mature women in those communities who are coming forward and showing the most interest while those who are most disengaged are working class men.

As regional University it is important to understand that past and present students are likely provide inspiration and raise aspirations for others in their communities. The next step for this research is to see how the University's learning environment and learning and teaching issues can help or hinder mature women to meet their aspirations by entering higher education as Stuart (2002) states "Currently, widening participation is linked to concern about retention as well as access because there is a recognition that it is not enough to bring people into an education system but that they also must be able to progress through it".

### **Concluding questions to the audience**

***In your institutions, which subjects are mature women not widely represented? What are you doing to raise their aspiration to study at your institution and in your subject? Does it matter?***

***Please share your ideas over the break***

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